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The Interpretation of Prophecy and the Advent Movement

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The Importance of the Study of Prophecy

Throughout the centuries, prophecy and its interpretation have fascinated people. What the future will bring and how it will affect our lives is something that all of us would like to know since the way we understand a particular prophecy has a far-reaching influence on our lifestyle and day-to-day decisions.

Two thousand years ago, wise men from the east traveled long distances loaded with rich treasures to pay honor and respect to the newborn baby Jesus as a result of a study of ancient prophecies and the sacred Hebrew Scriptures.¹

Jesus Christ linked the preaching of His gospel to the time prophecy of the beginning of the Messiah's mission (Dan 9:25) when He proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

After his conversion, the apostle Paul referred to Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah as a powerful instrument in preaching the gospel, and revealed that prophecy was the foundation of his faith. "In his presentation of the gospel he [Paul] sought to make plain the prophecies relating to the first advent of Christ. He showed conclusively that these prophecies had been literally fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. The foundation of his faith was the sure word of prophecy."²

The Scriptures reveal that the Lord will continue to shed light through His Word upon our path (2 Pet 1:19). This means that "increased light will shine upon all the grand truths of prophecy, and they will be seen in freshness and brilliancy, because the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness will illuminate the whole."³

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 59, 60.

² Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 125.

³ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 198.

During the Christian era, especially in the Early Church and from the Reformation until the 19th century, the study of prophecy played an important role. It was interest in prophecy during the early part of the 19th century that led to the rise of the Great Second Advent movement.

Principles of Bible Interpretation

In the Great Second Advent movement, William Miller's principles of interpreting the Bible and prophecy were widely used. These principles are spelled out in the book *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology*. Some of the most important principles are as follows:

1. "Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible." This means the whole Bible is the context of each subject to be studied. No interpretation on a particular prophecy should be presented without looking at every passage in the Bible related to this prophecy.

2. "All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study." In interpreting the Bible, persons should not make conclusions about passages based only on the immediate context but take all Scripture into consideration.

3. "Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering." Faith is crucial for the proper understanding of the Bible. Without genuine faith it is impossible to arrive at the correct interpretation.

4. "To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error." In the study of Bible prophecy, a prophecy must be studied in the context of the passage, the chapter, the book, as well as the whole of Scripture before one can come to the proper interpretation. The correct interpretation will be one that will not contradict any of these contexts.

5. "Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible." The principles of interpreting Bible prophecy must come from the Bible itself and should not depend on commentators. This implies that a thorough study of how the Bible interprets itself is fundamental to the study of prophecy. In

interpreting prophecy, therefore, it is important that one uses the methods employed by Bible writers.⁴

Commenting on these principles of interpretation, Ellen White said, “Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel’s message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted.” She described the above list of principles as “simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation,” and adds “we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.”⁵

Results of the Historicist Interpretation of Prophecy

The use of these principles did not originate with William Miller but have been used by many Christians over time, especially during the Early Church and the Protestant Reformation. The results of this method of interpreting prophecy have been impressive. Bible students clearly saw that the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation were predictions about the great controversy between Christ and Satan, between God’s people and Satan’s followers from the time of the prophets Daniel and John till Christ’s second advent.⁶

The following are some of the insights obtained from these Bible prophecies.

The Image of Daniel 2

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the image of Dan 2 reveals the “remarkable events that were to transpire in prophetic history.”⁷ It shows the succession of the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, followed by a world of divided kingdoms that will be destroyed when Christ sets up His kingdom of glory.⁸

This prophecy demonstrates God’s “power over the kingdoms of the world, to set up kings and to throw down kings.”⁹ The inability of the wise men to explain the dream “is a representation of the wise men of the present

⁴ Ellen G. White, “Notes of Travel,” *Review and Herald*, 61, no. 47 (25 November 1884), 737.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1948, 1950).

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies on Education* (s.l. : s.n., 1897), 10.

⁸ Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation*, rev. ed. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1944), 39–69.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies on Education*, 11.

day, who have not discernment and learning and knowledge from the Most High, and therefore are unable to understand the prophecies.”¹⁰

The Beasts of Daniel 7

Daniel’s vision of the four animals in Daniel 7 covers the same time span as the prophecy of Daniel 2 but expresses prophetic history with different symbols. Again we observe the four empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome symbolized by wild beasts portraying their role in the history of God’s people.¹¹

This time the prophecy gives more details about the events that were to take place during the reign of Rome which continues till the judgment takes place. The prophecy points out that from the Roman Empire ten powers will arise followed by another one, a little horn power, that blasphemes, persecutes, attempts to change times and law, and rules for a prophetic time-period of “a time, times, and half a time” or a total of three and a half times or years.

The Identification of the Little Horn of Daniel 7

During the first millennium of the Christian era, commentators thought that the little horn power was an evil individual who would afflict the church for three and a half years.¹² However, in the 13th century, when more than 1000 years had passed since the death of Christ, commentators began to apply a principle that also the time aspect of the symbolic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation should be understood symbolically. This meant that in these prophetic books a prophetic day stands for an actual solar year.¹³

Since the early church, this principle had already been successfully used to explain the fulfillment of the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 in the ministry and death of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Now commentators began to apply this year-day principle to the longer prophetic time periods such as the three and a half year, 42 months, 1260, 1290, 1335, and 2300 days in Daniel and Revelation.¹⁵

When commentators applied the year-day principle to the three and a half times of Dan 7, they concluded that the little horn power was to have

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1923), 412.

¹¹ Smith, 105–110.

¹² Froom, 1:246, 248, 456, 894.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:700–903, 894.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:241, 242, 260, 265, 266, 277–281, 348, 364, 365, 393, 457.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:894–897; 2:528–553.

authority over God's people for three and a half prophetic years, or 1260 prophetic days, which are in reality 1260 solar years.¹⁶

Then commentators began to identify the little horn with an evil persecuting system that dominated God's people for more than 1000 years instead of an evil person. From studying the history of Christianity, they concluded that the characteristics of the little horn could best be identified with the rise and career of the papacy.¹⁷

There was, however, no unanimity as to the precise beginning and ending dates in the career of the papacy. Not until the time of the French Revolution did commentators find a satisfactory explanation for the beginning as well as the end of papal authority over the Christian Church.

In 1798, at the conclusion of a long conflict between the revolutionary government in France and the papacy, Napoleon's general Berthier issued a declaration on the Capitoline Hill in Rome abolishing the papal government.¹⁸ At that time the French took Pope Pius VI captive and transported him to France where he died in exile the following year. This action was such a significant blow to the prestige and power of the papacy that commentators of that time identified this event with the end of the 1260 prophetic days.¹⁹ But what about the beginning year of this prophetic time period?

In 533 Emperor Justinian issued a newly revised law code of the Roman Empire that incorporated a letter recognizing the pope as "the head of all the Holy Churches" of Christendom.²⁰ However, it was not until the year 538, exactly 1260 years prior to 1798, that the Roman General Belisarius was able to implement Emperor Justinian's new law code in Rome and bring Italy again under the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire. In that year the Ostrogoths, who had ruled Italy up until this time, suffered great losses in the yearlong battle for the city of Rome.²¹ The well-known historian Edward Gibbon commented on the event that the nation of the Ostrogoths "was almost entirely consumed in the siege of Rome."²² Shortly afterward the Ostrogoths vanquished from the scene of history.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1:894; 2:528.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1:894; 2:528, 784.

¹⁸ Richard Duppa, *A Brief Account of the Subversion of the Papal Government, 1798*, 2nd ed. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1799), 38–41. See also, Froom, 2:752, 756–758.

¹⁹ Froom, 2:765–782.

²⁰ The Code of Our Lord the Most Sacred Emperor Justinian, book 1, title 1, section 4, 2nd ed. in S. P. Scott, *The Civil Law* (Cincinnati: Central Trust Co., 1932), 12:11–13.

²¹ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. by Thomas J. Dunlap (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 344–346.

²² Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1900), 3:528.

In surveying the history of prophetic interpretation one can truly say that this was the only time period in history in which beginning and ending dates fulfilled the specifications of the 1260-years prophecy that the little horn power had the legal power to dominate Christendom. Indeed, Daniel prophesied “the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time” (Dan 7:25).

Contrary to the expectation of commentators from the end of the 18th century, the papacy was not destroyed in 1798. Prophecy called the captivity of the pope and the abolition of his government a “deadly wound” but reveals that the wound was to be healed. After the healing of the wound the influence and prestige of the papacy again would be so astounding that the prophecy states that the whole world marveled and followed this power (Rev 13:3).

Since the Reformation many commentators have seen that the prophecies of Dan 12, Rev 12:6, 13–16, and 13:1–10 cover similar ground as that of Dan 7, warning God’s people against the coming deception. Using the historicist approach to prophecy, they noted that these chapters are parallel prophecies, describing with different symbols the fierce conflict between God’s people and the papacy.²³ This repetition of the same prophetic time periods dealing with the career of the papacy reinforces God’s concern about preparing His people to face the final overwhelming deception that will deceive nearly everyone.

The War on God’s People

The prophecy of Dan 12 shows that the three and a half prophetic years or 1260 years of papal dominance in scattering God’s people was to come to an end at the beginning of the time of the end. In 1798 the power of the papacy over all Christians, granted by Justinian’s law code, had come to an end. The French Revolution and Napoleon were responsible for the replacement of the ancient Roman law system that influenced Europe for more than millennium with the modern world order of history.²⁴

Napoleon’s contribution to the area of law is depicted by a white marble bas-relief that decorates the wall of the circular gallery surrounding Napoleon’s tomb in the church of Dome in Paris. Napoleon is depicted there as the one who has abolished the law code of Justinian that dominated the old establishment and has introduced the modern world by his law code, the Code Napoleon.²⁵

²³ Froom, 2:529, 531.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 759, 760.

²⁵ Cf. J. M. Humbert and L. Dumarche, *The Tomb of Napoleon & the Hôtel des Invalides*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions la Goélette, 1990), 20.

The prophecy of Rev 11 reveals again the power that treads God's people underfoot for 1260 years. During this period, God's witnesses, the Old and New Testament, prophesied in mourning attire (Rev 11:3). The papal suppression of the truth of the Scriptures and the rejection of the Reformation in France caused such deterioration in society that it led to the rise of a power that tried to exterminate the Bible and Christianity at the end of the 1260 years (Rev 11:7, 8).²⁶

In this war of extermination on the Bible, God's witnesses are portrayed as lying dead in the streets of the great city (Rev 11:7, 8). This symbolic scene had its fulfillment in France where during the three and a half-years reign of terror in the French Revolution the Bible and the Christian faith was outlawed.²⁷ This godless power also had the courage and the determination to take on the papacy, abolished its government in 1798, and exiled the pope without any interference of the Catholic nations that surrounded it. This event was so important that the Bible devotes nearly a whole chapter on the circumstances and the power that brought the deadly wound to the papacy.

The prophecies of Rev 12 and 13 give further details of Satan's war on God's people. They reveal Satan's work through those earthly governments which are especially engaged in opposing His law and persecuting His people. First, Satan attempted to destroy God's people through the great kingdoms controlled by paganism, symbolized by the dragon, and then through the papacy, symbolized by the leopard-like beast, during the 1260 years.²⁸

After the ascension of Christ, Satan attacked the true church, portrayed as a pure glorious woman (Rev 12:1). However, God protected His people by providing shelter in the secluded and isolated places of the earth during the 1260 years so that they were not wiped out (Rev 12:6, 14, 16). In spite of the floodwaters of persecution, God watched over His people and guided them to places of protection in the sparsely populated regions of the earth.

At the end of this oppression, God still has a people left that witness to His glory. Those left are a remnant of the apostolic church that are fully obedient and are guided by Jesus Himself. They are described as they who keep God's commandments and have the testimony of Jesus, which is the Spirit of Prophecy (Rev 12:17; 19:10).

Revelation 13 reveals a leopard-like beast that was to blaspheme God, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven for 42 prophetic months or three and a half prophetic years or 1260 years. This beast has similar char-

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 226, 227, 230, 265–286.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4 (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1884), 276.

acteristics as the little horn of Daniel 7 which led commentators to the conclusion that the beast was nothing less than the papacy.²⁹ At the end of this period the beast was to receive a mortal wound so that it was deprived of its power and was unable to continue its bloody war on Bible-believing Christians. We have shown earlier that this deadly wound took place during the French Revolution in 1798 with the captivity of Pope Pius VI.

In Rev 13 we find, however, that this wound was to be healed, causing the whole world again to wonder after the beast (Rev 13:3). The history of the papacy since 1798 suggests the healing of the wound in the rise of the prestige of the pope, causing many nations of the world to have diplomatic relations with this religious political power. Today over 170 nations have diplomatic relations with the papacy.

The Cleansing of the Sanctuary

The same controversy between good and evil is dealt with in Daniel 8 where the apostate powers of paganism and papacy successfully exalted themselves against God and His people, His truth, and His sanctuary. The oppressive influence of these apostate powers were to continue till the end of the 2300 days. In applying the year-day principle to the 2300 days, commentators generally felt that at the end of that period God would intervene on behalf of His people with the cleansing of the sanctuary.

Commentators concluded that the beginning of the 70 weeks prophecy, or the 490 prophetic years, of Dan 9 was also the beginning of the 2300 days. Dating the beginning of the 490 years in 457 B.C., they calculated that the end of the 2300 years to be about 1844.³⁰

God's people, having been oppressed by the apostate powers of Persia, Greece, and Rome (pagan and papal) for a period of 2300 years were to experience with the beginning of the cleansing of the sanctuary in 1844 a liberation from spiritual fallen Babylon.

In the context of the whole Bible, especially Exodus, Leviticus, Hebrews and Revelation, commentators discovered that the cleansing of the sanctuary introduced a period of time called the hour of God's judgment when Jesus Christ, as High Priest in the Most Holy place of the heavenly sanctuary, began a judgment prior to His return to earth.³¹ This "hour of His judgment" (Rev 14:7) was to be followed by the Day of Judgment (Rev 14:18–20) that destroyed those who had failed to repent and accept the judgment hour warning.

²⁹ Froom, 2:787.

³⁰ Ibid., 4:404, 405.

³¹ White, *Great Controversy*, 428–432, 485–490.

The nature of “the hour of His judgment” is revealed in Daniel 7 and would include all God’s people who had ever lived. This judgment would begin with the dead among God’s people and would conclude with the living. In the heavenly court, in view of the multitudes of the heavenly host (Dan 7:10), this judgment was to determine who among God’s professed people would be part of the first resurrection.³²

While Jesus began to cleanse the heavenly sanctuary the Holy Spirit was to begin a cleansing of God’s people. This cleansing would produce the remnant church of prophecy. At that time Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, was to begin a purification of God’s people by calling them out of spiritual Babylon. This exodus was to bring spiritual renewal to the faithful loyal believers and a restoration of long forgotten truths that were to be of vital importance in their preparation for the second advent.

The Prophetic Remnant

The prophetic remnant made up of those who severed their connection with Babylon is to enlighten the whole world with the righteousness of Christ in the context of the end-time prophetic messages of Revelation (Rev 14: 6–12). These messages are called the last message of mercy. They contain the final hope for humanity. They are the messages that unite the faithful remnant and will bring the whole world to a decision. It is after everyone in this world has made up their mind that probation will close, the time of trouble will break upon God’s people, and Michael will stand up to deliver His people (Dan 12:1). Then God’s loyal remnant will be united with their Savior and be with their beloved Savior throughout the endless ages of eternity.

The preservation of this historicist view of prophecy has made Seventh-day Adventists unique in their prophetic mission in the world today. When around 1844 the Christian denominations rejected the light on the prophecy of Dan 8:14 that came through the Second Advent Movement these churches gradually gave up the historicist approach to prophecy. With this rejection of prophetic truth these churches also lost the Protestant view of prophetic history. It was not long after, that nearly all of Christianity accepted modern futurism or preterism so strongly promoted by the Jesuits during the Counter Reformation and beyond.

As a result of this prophetic paradigm shift among Protestants after 1844, a new worldview emerged where Protestants no longer consider the little horn of prophecy as the persecuting papal power that dominated the Christian Church for more than a thousand years. Consequently, today many Protestants try to find ways how they could cooperate and even worship to-

³² Ibid., 480.

gether with Roman Catholics in order to achieve unity among Christians no matter how much they differ in their view of the Bible and its doctrines.

To protect believers against the inroads of futurism or preterism, the following advice by the Spirit of Prophecy is helpful regarding our attitude toward prophecies that have already had a historical fulfillment:

The Lord wants all to understand His providential dealings now, just now, in the time in which we live. There must be no long discussions, presenting new theories in regard to the prophecies which God has already made plain. Now the great work from which the mind should not be diverted is the consideration of our personal safety in the sight of God. Are our feet on the rock of ages? Are we hiding ourselves in our only refuge? The storm is coming, relentless in its fury. Are we prepared to meet it? Are we one with Christ as He is one with the Father? Are we heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ? Are we working in copartnership with Christ?³³

³³ White, *Evangelism*, 199.